

Summary

- Growing Well is a care and social enterprise. It was set up by Beren Aldridge in 2004, and has a voluntary board of directors. The company employs three full-time and three part-time staff whose skills include management, training, education, psychotherapy and counseling.
- Growing Well grows organic produce (to field scale) and delivers accredited training in horticulture. It actively encourages participation by the local community through membership, educational visits and courses.
- The land and buildings are rented from a tenanted National Trust farm, on whose land it is based and which has a farm shop that Growing Well supplies.

What is special about this care farm

There is a symbiotic relationship between Growing Well and the farm tenants. Growing Well sells its produce to the farm shop, and it benefits from the increased profile brought about by Growing Well's social activities.

Growing Well does not provide horticultural therapy, stresses Beren, the manager. "We are run as a business, and being involved – being outdoors, seeing things grow and eating the produce – is what people benefit from."

Local schools are encouraged to make structured visits (half day/full day) linked to the national curriculum, and particular experience has been developed with primary schools.

As part of its work with the wider community, Growing Well offers training and NVQs in horticulture to the whole community, not just its students.

Target market

Growing Well provides opportunities for people recovering from mental health problems to develop their confidence and skills by volunteering within a thriving business. (Before setting up, market research revealed that there was a shortage of structured day services for people recovering from mental health problems, and that those that did exist suffered from insecure, grant-reliant funding – which also meant they had high staff turnover).

Applicants to become volunteers at Growing Well must fulfill three conditions: they must be recovering from a mental health problem; they must be actively considering a return to work or training; and they must be stably housed and should not have an untreated addiction.

Growing Well uses an application process rather than a referral process. This supports its ethos that the volunteers are becoming active community members, rather than being 'patients.'

Some of the students study for an NVQs 1-3 in Horticulture, or for a Certificate in Horticulture, all of which are offered under a franchise agreement with the local FE College, Kendal College.

Volunteers attend the farm for between one half day and three days per week, and some stay two or three years (there is no finite period). One advantage of Growing Well is that it is on a bus route, by which many of the volunteers travel. In their final months volunteers are signposted to other services, and helped with transition to other activities.

Growing Well provides around 2000 placements each year (there is capacity for 2500) to around 50 volunteers, two-thirds of whom are male. Those with secondary mental health needs (50% of volunteers) are paid for by Cumbria's Social Services. But there is an open door policy, with nobody turned away, and those with more severe needs (50%) have to be funded by a grant from a charitable trust. Says Beren: "We would like to get funding for those with primary care needs but we have not done so yet."

The bottom line

Growing Well's operational costs are approximately £250,000 pa. About two-thirds of this is met by trading activities (crop sales, horticultural training and mental health recovery activities), with the balance from charitable trusts.

In their own words

Motivation – Beren describes his motivation as an opportunity 'to combine my personal interests of mental health recovery and food growing.' He has a background and long-standing interest in mental health, which he has supplemented with skills on running horticultural businesses and developing social enterprises.

Approach – Growing Well's aim, he explains, is to provide people with a bridge between being cared for in a medical environment and a job where they won't get any special treatment. In his view Growing Well provides a work environment that gives people the opportunity to develop their self-confidence by taking on responsibilities and participating in a team.

Benefits – All the volunteers report significant gains in confidence and self-esteem, says Beren. "By working here, in a structured way, it increases their confidence to meet people generally; and by taking on responsibilities here they take on tasks in their home life."

One of the first volunteers, Duncan, explains how Growing Well helped him: "Long term depression led me to withdraw from work and society," he says. "But coming here helped massively...being part of an organisation, getting my hands dirty and seeing things grow has re-built my self-confidence and enabled me to find work again."

Key challenges

Beren says there have been three challenges to his work. "Firstly, our business is a 'people business' in a farming setting," he says. "We have to make the people part of the business pay us the appropriate amount – because we only earn 10% of our running costs from farming activities."

"Secondly, the 'people stuff' remains undervalued by funders – at least around here [Cumbria]."

And finally: "It takes time, energy and resources to engage with the local community and to get a response – we are just getting there after five years."

Tips for others

Beren offers two tips of advice for others: Have a realistic Business Plan built on modest expectations – he says their plan was ambitious – and have a good Board of Directors.



Site View

"Located on six acres of Low Sizergh Farm - an organic dairy farm. This photo shows the site as viewed from the car park we share with the farm shop. Our field site has vehicle access, mains electricity and water supplies, incorporating a fully automatic irrigation system that operates both indoors and outdoors".

For more information

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